

# Existential problems in the novel: The character and his world

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## **Declaration**

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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25<sup>th</sup> March 2009

## The Exegesis

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## Introduction

### 1. Summary of exegesis content

This exegesis is an investigation into Milan Kundera's theory of literary character construction using *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald as a case study. Summarising his theory, Kundera proposes that, 'making a character 'alive' means: getting to the bottom of his existential problem' (Kundera 1999, p. 35). A brief exploration of how Kundera applies his theory in his novels will be developed by citing examples to further refine a definition of the theory through examination of the practice.

The work of three leading Fitzgerald scholars, Matthew Brucoli<sup>1</sup>, Ronald Berman<sup>2</sup>, and Tony Tanner<sup>3</sup>, will be examined to illuminate the context in which *The Great Gatsby* was written and to explore their insights into the character construction of Jay Gatsby. Additionally Fitzgerald's own letters and diary notes will be used to deepen understanding of the literary aspirations and techniques that preoccupied him during the writing of *The Great Gatsby*. From this study of the construction of the character of Jay Gatsby, an analysis of how Kundera's theory may apply to Fitzgerald's practice will be undertaken for the purpose of gaining insight into how literary techniques for character construction work in novels of contrasting tradition, era and genre.

An examination of how the literary techniques deployed by both Kundera and Fitzgerald have informed the writing of my novel, *The Luna Museum*, and the construction of the character, Nick Barlow will follow. From this reflection on my own creative practice through the filter of Kundera and Fitzgerald, I will consider the universality of Kundera's theory applied to distinctively different eras, modes and traditions of fictional writing. Key to this investigation will be the development of a new insight into the art of character construction informed by the investigation undertaken in this exegesis.

The exegesis will culminate in proffering an answer to the key research question: How does Kundera's theory of using existential problems as a basis for character construction apply to Fitzgerald's creation of Jay Gatsby and how does it inform the creation of Nick Barlow in my novel, *The Luna Museum*?

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Brucoli is the Emily Brown Jefferies Professor of English at the University of South Carolina and the leading authority on F. Scott Fitzgerald

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Berman is the Professor of Literature, University of California at San Diego

<sup>3</sup> Tony Tanner was a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge and Professor of English and American Literature

## **2. Basis for the selection of Kundera's theory applied to Fitzgerald's novel as case study**

The rationale for selecting Kundera's theory of character construction and applying it to *The Great Gatsby* is based on the objective of gaining fresh insight into the literary strategies necessary to create successful characters by testing the universality of both Kundera's theory and Fitzgerald's literary techniques. Both Kundera and Fitzgerald are acclaimed twentieth century novelists whose literary works have endured, yet their creative practices are strikingly different.

The core differences between the novels of Kundera and Fitzgerald are:

- Historical context ó Fitzgerald wrote in the 1920s and Kundera's main novels were published in the 1970s and 1980s.
- Cultural and political context ó Fitzgerald wrote in post-World War 1 democratic, capitalist America and Kundera's novels are informed by and set in the Cold War culture of the totalitarian communist state of Czechoslovakia.
- Literary tradition ó Fitzgerald's novels are written in the American realist tradition and Kundera's novels are written in the European psychological tradition, though in a post-modern genre. However both novelists are acclaimed for their originality within their respective periods and traditions.
- Form, themes, ideas and style are all contrasting

Since this exegesis is primarily concerned with literary technique rather than themes, Kundera has been selected based on his explication of his literary techniques for character construction in *The Art of Novel* rather than his fictional writing which explores existential themes. Therefore this exegesis seeks to test Kundera's technique outside of the practice of novelists traditionally identified with existential themes such as Jean-Paul Sartre or Albert Camus, in order to establish the universality of Kundera's technique applied to novels which are not regarded as existentialist.

Through an investigation of what literary techniques for character construction might be common to both Kundera and Fitzgerald and by simultaneously revealing their differences, this exegesis attempts to distil literary techniques for character construction that can be applied widely.

### **3. The exegesis in the context of academic writing**

Through a review of theoretical and critical writing on Kundera and Fitzgerald, it seems that this exegesis will examine Kundera's methodology in the context of Fitzgerald's writing in a way that has not been attempted previously. Therefore I aim to view Fitzgerald's character, Gatsby, afresh through Kundera's theory to examine how Fitzgerald constructed Gatsby and how Kundera's theory applies outside of his own practice.

### **4. Summary of the structure of the exegesis**

#### **Chapter 1 – The theorist - Milan Kundera - the theory and practice of character Construction**

- definition of how the term *existential* will be used
- Kundera's theory defined
- how the theory applies to Kundera's practice citing examples
- analysis of the theory in practice

#### **Chapter 2 – The case study – *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald**

- literary techniques and strategies used in the creation of the character, Gatsby
- the use of existential problems in the creation and interpretation of Gatsby
- analysis of how Kundera's theory does and does not apply to the creation of Gatsby

#### **Chapter 3 – The creative practice – *The Luna Museum***

- how the techniques for character construction discovered in chapters one and two informed the creation of Nick Barlow in *The Luna Museum*

#### **Conclusion – interpretations of theory and practice**

- summary of main argument
- response to the research question
- insights gained through the exegesis investigation and creative practice

## **Chapter One – The theorist – Milan Kundera**

### **The theory and practice of character construction**

#### **1. Introduction**

Characters are an essential and defining element of fiction. They are the conduits for action, embodiment of ideas and the agents of experience. Henry James wrote, ‘Character in any sense in which we can get at it, is action and action is plot...’ (1984, p. 13). James’ quote epitomises the significance of characters – characters are the story and convey the meaning of the story.

Much is written about the purpose, functions and contribution characters make to the success of literary novels. However these observations regarding aims and outcomes occur after the literary characters are complete and they reside in their novels. This exegesis is concerned with understanding the techniques of character construction that inform the writing of novels.

The novelist’s aim in undertaking the novel is a significant influence on the techniques adopted. Kundera’s aim for his novels is that they must discover a ‘new segment of existence’ (Kundera 1999, p. 5). This derives from Herman Broch’s idea that the ‘sole raison d’être of a novel is to discover what only the novel can discover .... a hitherto unknown segment of existence...’ (Kundera 1999, p. 5). Kundera is therefore investigating existence to discover something new.

This loosely accords with Fitzgerald’s aim which he explained in a letter to his daughter, Scottie Fitzgerald, on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1939, offering her advice on how to write, ‘If you have anything to say, anything you feel nobody has ever said before...you will find some way to say it that nobody has ever found before, so that the thing you have to say and the way of saying it blend as one matter – as indissolubly as if they were conceived together’ (Brucoli 1996, p.157).

Fitzgerald’s stated aim is similar to Kundera’s in that he believes the novel should say something new, but Fitzgerald added an aesthetic element that was essential to his creative ideals – ‘the thing you have to say and the way of saying blend as one matter ... indissolubly’ (Brucoli 1996, p. 157). For Fitzgerald, writing succeeds when an expressed idea carries the force of the original thought, which he believed meant that a new idea would necessarily ‘invent a new style’ (Brucoli 1996, p. 157). Therefore Fitzgerald attributes equal significance to the originality of the thought and how the thought is



expressed in writing. Further exploration of how the characteristics of Fitzgerald's style are essential to understanding his literary technique will occur in Chapter Two alongside an examination of how the differing aims of both Kundera and Fitzgerald informed the literary techniques they deployed.

## **2. Definition of how the term *existential* will be used in this exegesis**

### **2.1 Background**

Walter Kaufmann, philosopher and scholar, wrote that existentialism is a broad term used to describe a diverse body of nineteenth and twentieth century philosophical and literary writing which encompasses, "...different revolts against traditional philosophy" (Kaufman, 2004, p.11). Many of the writers and philosophers associated with the evolution of existentialism, "have repudiated this label" (Kaufman, 1975, p.11) and would not agree on any particular system of thought which would constitute the tenets of a philosophy (Kaufman, 1975, p.11). However there are three notable philosophers prevalent in the vast body of writing on existentialist thought and included in both Kaufmann's writing and the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*: Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. Additional prominent philosophers and writers associated with existentialism include, among others, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers, José Ortega y Gasset and Edmund Husserl. It is not in the scope of this exegesis to offer a summary of the philosophical writing of any of these philosophers. Therefore only the most basic tenets of Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre are explored below to frame the key investigation of Kundera's literary technique.

Writing in the nineteenth century, Kierkegaard is chronologically the first of these primary sources of existentialist thought. Kaufman states that Kierkegaard proposes "a radical revision of the popular idea of the self, and focuses attention on decision" (Kaufman, 1975, p.17). Kierkegaard used the term "existing individual" from which the term existentialism is derived (Baldwin, 2005, p 277). Heidegger's main work, *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*) published first in 1927 (Heidegger, 1996, p. xvii) is the magnum opus of his philosophical writing and an important influence on Sartre. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger develops his idea of *in-der-Welt-sein* (being-in-the-world) in which *Da-sein* (the who of human existence) ... "is taken in by its world" (Heidegger, 1996, p.114). Being-in-the-world is a key idea that Kundera explains underpins his technique for character

construction (Kundera, 1999, p. 36) which is explored in point 3.2 of this chapter. Kaufman proposes that it was Sartre who brought the term existentialism to a wider audience in the 1940s (Kaufman, 1975, p.40). An important tenet of Sartre's existentialism is that existence precedes essence (Kaufman, 1975, p.348). In his lecture in 1945, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre stated that what the French existentialists (including himself) and Heidegger had in common was that they believe that existence comes before essence, and explained that this means, ... 'we must begin with the subjective...' and, 'Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism' (Sartre, Kaufman, 1975, pp.348-349). Heidegger distanced himself from Sartre's existentialism in his response to Sartre's lecture, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, writing in his *Letter on Humanism* that 'the basic tenet of "existentialism" has nothing at all in common with the statement from *Being and Time*...' (Heidegger 1998, p. 250).

## 2.2 Existentialist literature

In addition to Sartre, there are many other writers widely considered to have explored existential themes in novels and plays, including Fyodor Dostoevsky, Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus (Kaufman, 1975 p. 11). More recently the novels of J.M Coetzee (notably *Waiting for the Barbarians* which echoes Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*) and the plays of Tom Stoppard investigate existential themes and are evolved from the existentialist literary tradition.

## 2.3 The definition of the term *existential* in the context of this exegesis

While there exists a vast body of philosophical and literary writing based on the existentialist movement as defined primarily by Sartre, the definition of the term *existential* for the purposes of this exegesis does not draw on Sartre but on Kundera's narrow definition based on Heidegger.

Kundera's definition of *existential problem* is developed for use in character construction and is based on Heidegger's term, being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1998, p.49). Therefore it is only Kundera's definition of existential problems in the context of a literary technique and not existential philosophy as literary themes that will be explored in the scope of this exegesis. This focus on technique rather than themes facilitates the use of the novel, *The Great Gatsby*, as a case study because it contrasts significantly with the novels

of Kundera and is not considered within the body of existentialist writing. Further, Kundera is using the word *existential* based on Heidegger and in the context of the canon of literary fiction and not in the context of existentialist writing.

### 3. Kundera's theory defined

#### 3.1 Summary

Kundera's theory regarding the function of characters can be summarised as follows:

- characters are experimental selves set in history
- since characters are selves, this implies that they are representations of consciousness
- being-in-the-world means that characters are inextricably part of their worlds and that forms a definition of existence

Kundera's definition of an existential problem for the purpose of this exegesis will be:

- the core and specific problem of existence for the character
- how the core problem of existence of the character is enmeshed with the world of the novel
- the situations, motifs, words and ideas that are the means by which to apprehend the enigma of the self of the fictional character

#### 3.2 The self in the world of history

Kundera explores the history of the European novel (Kundera 1999, pp.3-10) which he extends to novels from all places that share a cultural genesis with Europe, including America, and highlights iconic literary characters through the centuries to illuminate his theory: that 'making a character alive' means: getting to the bottom of his existential problem (Kundera 1999, p. 35). Additionally Kundera defines *existence* as 'Man and the world are bound together like the snail to its shell: the world is part of man, it is his dimension and as the world changes, existence ... changes as well' (Kundera 1999, p. 36). This definition is derived from Heidegger who interprets existence as *in-der-Welt-sein* or being-in-the-world (Kundera 1999, p. 36).

In order to add context to Kundera's quotation above it is necessary to understand how he regards the novel. Kundera states in an interview with Christian Salmon that 'All

novels, of every age, are concerned with the enigma of the self (Kundera 1999, p. 23). However Kundera makes the distinction that a character is not a simulation of a living being. It is an imaginary being. An experimental self (Kundera 1999, p.34). In the writing of a novel, novelists deploy various means to apprehend their specific versions of the self. For Kundera, this means is to grasp the essence of its (the self's) existential problem... and, making a character alive means getting to the bottom of his existential problem ... getting to the bottom of some situations, some motifs, even some words that shape him (Kundera 1999, p. 35). Kundera further explains that by some he means that the novelist must select the situations, motifs and words that provide a revelation of the characters existential problem and therefore the novelist excludes those circumstances that do not add to the development or meaning of the revelations (Kundera 1999, p.35). An example of this is that Kundera omits a physical description and family background of the main character, Tomas, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Kundera, 1984). However for another character, Tereza, her family background and appearance are described in the text. The basis of these exclusions and inclusions is how they illuminate the existential problem of each character (Kundera, 1984).

It is important to distinguish Kundera's notion of an existential problem from other types of problems that populate fiction. An existential problem is one of existence; i.e. the nature of human life and experience within the specific world of the novel. It is not a problem of emotion or circumstances or society or psychology but of existence. For example, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the main character, Tomas, cannot accept the lightness of life in a world where everything only occurs once. We know this because Kundera has explained it in the text. However Tomas has other problems as well: he cannot be faithful to Tereza, the woman he loves; he is a surgeon in Prague but later becomes a window cleaner and then a driver for a collective farm and so loses his career; he is frightened that he may not be able to live without Tereza. These are all problems that the character Tomas faces in the novel, but they are not existential problems, they are problems of circumstance, emotion, society and psychology. However they are informed by and derived from Tomas's core existential problem: how can his life be significant if it is only lived once?

Kundera writes that the novel depicts the existence of selves within history and therefore of its actual experience of the self of the times, not an anachronistic self-transposed (Kundera 1999, p. 5). Kundera illustrates his theory by listing some iconic characters and their worlds: Cervantes's characters exist in a world that is local and small.

Beyond the boundaries of this 17<sup>th</sup> century world there is a sense of infinite adventure and so the existential inquiry and problem for Cervantes is 'the nature of adventure' (Kundera 1999, p. 5). In Balzac's world the novel discovers 'man's rootedness in history' for Proust it is the past; for Joyce it is the elusive present moment. In these examples there is an important elaboration to make regarding the character and his world – the character's world is set in history, though it is a fictional world.

Kundera is suggesting that characters are more than just figures or identities or representations set in history from the external view, but *selves* – the consciousness of selves in the experience of their times. James E. Miller characterises Henry James's theory of characters as 'The matrix of character and action is consciousness. Thus consciousness becomes key to fictional interest ... (and) major material for representation' (1984, p.16). It would seem that Kundera agrees with this when he writes of existential problems and selves as these are devices by which to probe and explicate consciousness. However Kundera explains that he does not use interior monologue (Kundera 1999, p. 29) to take the reader inside the characters' minds but analyses the characters' consciousness for the reader. The effect of this technique is to make the meaning and idea of the character explicit by delivering the interpretation directly and not imbedding it in characters' minds or actions for readers to interpret as James and most other literary novelists do. This is a matter of genre and style – but it is also a technique.

Therefore according to Kundera an existential problem is comprised of two inextricable components: the self and the historical world of the self. Heidegger's 'being in the world' suggests that 'being' can only occur in the world. So in the real world these are not separate elements or components but one indissoluble thing – existence. However a novelist must create a character and a world to ultimately achieve a fictional story that succeeds in representing the chosen existence he aims to portray.

In order to fuse these two literary components – the character and his world – into a representation of existence Kundera adopts the character's existential problem as the basis for creating the 'being' of the world of the novel.

## 4. How Kundera constructs characters

### 4.1 The inspiration

Peter Kussi writes that Kundera said in an interview in 1963: "Precision of thought moves me more than precision of observation...." (Bloom 2003, p. 17). Kundera explains in *The Art of Fiction* that his characters are: "born of a situation, a sentence, a metaphor containing in a nutshell a basic human possibility that the author thinks no one else has discovered or said something essential about" (Kundera 1999, p.29).

Kundera's character inspiration begins with thoughts, philosophies and ideas rendered in words. This occurs on two levels: in the actual writer's inspiration for the character and in the writing itself. For example, Kundera opens *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, with Nietzsche's philosophy of eternal return "that everything recurs as we once experienced it" (Kundera 1984, p. 3). Kundera explores the meaning of this philosophy through the contemplation of its opposite: that a life lived once does not return and is "like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance" (Kundera 1984, p. 3). The idea is further examined by placing the philosophy in various histories, for example, how we might consider the French Revolution were it to constantly recur "Kundera suggests it would "have turned into mere words" (Kundera 1984, p. 3). He concludes that "eternal return is the heaviest of burdens" (Kundera 1984, p. 5) and hence lives lived once are light. He asks the question: "which one is positive, weight or lightness?" (Kundera 1984, p. 5).

Following three pages of this philosophical investigation which culminate in the question above, Kundera introduces his first character, Tomas. At this point the story begins.

By exposing the inspiration and the philosophy that is the foundation of his characters, Kundera has, from the beginning of the novel, revealed their fundamental existential problems. Furthermore he has instructed the reader on how to apprehend the meaning of the characters (and effectively how to perceive the novel) "they are Kundera's imagined selves which can be used to probe the answers to the question, "which one is positive, weight or lightness?" Other philosophies, ideas and questions arise as the novel progresses, which offer further insights into the existential problems of the characters.

The way that Kundera sources his inspiration contrasts significantly with realist novelists. The characters in Fitzgerald's novels were inspired by the observation of real people. After a summer spent on Long Island where Fitzgerald met and observed wealthy

people, he was inspired to write *The Great Gatsby*. James also attested to the observation of real life as the inspiration for characters. James E. Miller writes: "James believed that subjects (characters) lived their own lives, and for the author to impose his abstractions of ideas, morals, philosophy of on them is to violate their freedom and to silence that truthful hum of the human scene at large" (James 1984, p. 7).

Kundera's characters are conceived in thought i.e. intellectual inquiry rather than observation of real life and as such the starting point for his literary technique differs from that of realist novelists like Fitzgerald and James.

## 4.2 The development

Kundera uses characters (experimental selves) to loosely embody and investigate certain words and themes of interest to him. He is seeking new definitions through investigation. Characters are the main device used in his investigation, but they are not the only one. Kundera also contemplates real history, philosophy and psychological insights and uses his characters to embody and illustrate the ideas he develops, which he calls "meditative interrogation" (Kundera 1999, p. 32). This methodology is explicit and Kundera directs the reader's attention through the dialectic steps to the realisation of his ideas in the actions of his characters, raising questions to prompt insights along the way.

For example, in the creation of Tomas in the *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the key words and therefore ideas that form the basis for character insight are *lightness* and *weight*. Kundera explains Tomas's existential problem as "the lightness of existence in a world where there is no eternal return" (Kundera 1999, p. 29). While the words *lightness* and *weight* are used in the text, they are primarily words for authorial investigation and analysis of Tomas's character. In this way the "existential code" (Kundera 1999, p. 29), meaning key words and motifs, explicates Tomas's existential problem and is both instructive to the author in the character creation process and used for interpreting the meaning of the character in the world of the book.

From this core authorial decision of to base the creation of Tomas on the existential code of "lightness of being" (Kundera 1999, p. 29) Kundera creates action, dialogue and interaction for the character. For example, Tomas is preoccupied by repetitive erotic encounters in an effort to contrive a world of eternal returns where mortality can be momentarily forgotten. Kundera then creates a situation, a love affair, which challenges Tomas's freedom to engage in his erotic encounters. Kundera introduces Tereza with the



vulnerability of a baby, using the metaphor of the baby Moses floating downstream in a bulrush basket, thereby adding weight to love. Presented with the need and vulnerability of a woman who is in love with him, Tomas's reaction further complicates and defines his existential problem: now that love is weight, its disappearance, its oneness, is lightness. The weight reminds Tomas of the lightness of life, the unbearability of life, of wanting something to last knowing that it cannot. Tomas pursues his repetitive erotic encounters with an increased desperation in order to escape the unbearable lightness of the ephemera of love.

The extract below describes the scene after Tomas and Tereza first make love and demonstrates how deftly Kundera moves between and synthesises his techniques of character construction:

—And all at once he (Tomas) fancied she (Tereza) had been with him for many years and was dying. He had a sudden clear feeling that he would not survive her death. He would lie down beside her and want to die with her. He pressed his face into the pillow beside her head and kept it there for a long time.

Now he was standing at the window trying to call that moment to account. What could it have been if not love declaring itself to him?

But was it love? His feeling of wanting to die beside her was clearly exaggerated: he had seen her only once before in his life! Was it simply the hysteria of a man who, aware deep down of his inaptitude for love, felt the self-deluding need to simulate it? His unconscious was so cowardly that the best partner it could choose for its little comedy was this miserable provincial waitress with practically no chance at all to enter his life!ø

Kundera, M 1984, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 7

And then three short paragraphs later:

—We can never know what to want, because, living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives nor perfect it in the lives to come.ø

Kundera, M 1984, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 7

In the first paragraph above Kundera describes a scene through Tomas's actions, thoughts and feelings. The reader is in the room with Tomas and Tereza and in Tomas's point of view.

In the second paragraph Tomas recalls their first lovemaking and asks a question. However the question is not a philosophical or existential question, but one issuing from Tomas's point of view.



In the third paragraph the point of view shifts and we are not sure whether it is Tomas's point of view or Kundera's when the question is asked 'But was it love?' Kundera writes 'You see, I don't show you what happens inside (a character's)...head; rather, I show what happens inside my own' (Kundera 1999, p.31).

Kundera proceeds to analyse the scene and Tomas's reaction. He offers the reader insight into Tomas's character suggesting that Tomas had an 'inaptitude for love' and felt the 'self-deluding need to simulate it' (Kundera 1984, p. 7). This is now Kundera's voice and authorial intervention.

In the later paragraph Kundera broadens his meditation on this scene into a philosophy about life that is derived from the core existential problem of Tomas and the novel: the lightness of life that is only lived once.

As John Bayley writes in his essay, *Kundera and Kitsch* (Bloom 2003, p. 24), this methodology is 'diagrammatic and explicit' and repeats throughout the novel. Kundera constantly interrupts the narrative to relay pieces of philosophy or psychological conjecture that work along with the narrative to explicate the existential problems of the character in his world.

Broadly the mechanics of Kundera's technique for character construction are:

- a statement of the philosophy or idea he wants to investigate
- an example of the philosophy in the real world elaborated on with his own insights
- a clear statement of the existential problem of the world of the novel and specific characters
- the contextualisation of the existential problem in situations and action developed through loose story lines that embody the ideas that Kundera wants to investigate
- the development of a new and deeper insight through overt authorial analysis of the character's psychology
- Kundera's resolution of the analysis into a disembodied, general philosophical conjecture outside of the characters and the story

#### 4.3 Summary:

- Kundera's characters are inspired by thoughts, ideas and words rather than real people or observation
- Kundera uses an existential code comprised of specific words to investigate his character's existential problems

- The narrative moves between points of view from the writer to the characters in order to explicate an analysis of the psychology of the character
- descriptions of scenes, characters' thoughts and feelings mix with philosophy, psychological insights and examples of real history to develop the story and the characters' existential problem, and therefore the 'new segment of existence' which Kundera aims to discover in the writing of the novel

## 5. Analytical commentary

It is not immediately clear from the sources used in this chapter to explicate Kundera's theory and practice how an existential problem makes a character 'alive' as he claims. Additionally it is not clear how the examples of existential problems extracted from Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* contribute to making the characters of their particular world, which is essential to Kundera's understanding of the definition of existence.

The character of Tomas is an experimental self used to probe the existential problem of interest to Kundera, however how does this existential problem function to make Tomas 'alive'? Kundera does not exactly define what he means by 'alive'. It could be interpreted that 'alive' characters are ones that endure over time and equally, characters that represent a possibility for existence in a possible world.

The moment when Tomas seems to come 'alive' is when he acts, when he has agency in the story. He is not alive when Kundera is interrogating his psychology or expounding the philosophy of his existential problems. Therefore the connection between making a character *alive* through its *existential problem* is not clearly evident in Kundera's practice.

The existential problem is the basis for the action and situations that Kundera chooses to attach to each character, but it is the action that triggers their aliveness. If the action did not connect with their existential problems this would attenuate their possibility of existence, but not exclude it entirely. However without action, regardless of the existential problems allotted them, the characters would not possess the capacity to come 'alive'.

The characters' existential problems are fore-fronted by Kundera as an instrument of perceiving the meaning of the character in his world, however it is only in action that we perceive the possibility of existence.

How the existential problems operate in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* to enmesh the characters in their world is also questionable. Tomas's core existential problem: the

lightness of life that is only lived once could occur in many worlds. There is nothing in the world of Cold War Prague created by Kundera that is specific to Tomas's existential problem, nor does his problem originate in Cold War Prague. The existential problems in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* originate in Kundera's mind and are born of phrases, motifs, ideas and not of reality and observation. Perhaps this is a reason why it could be argued that Kundera does not achieve a depiction of characters's true states of existence according to his own definition using Heidegger's *in-der-Welt-sein* or being-in-the-world...Man and the world are bound together like the snail to its shell: the world is part of man, it is his dimension, and as the world changes, existence...changes as well (Kundera 1999, p. 36). In order to explicate how the character is bound to his world, it would seem that Tomas's existential problem is not sufficiently specific to the experience of the self living in Cold War Prague.

## Chapter Two: The Case Study: *The Great Gatsby*

### 1. Introduction

*The Great Gatsby* holds in its pages the drift and vitality of early twentieth century America and the hypocrisies and complexities of the American Dream. In setting, culture, era and themes it is vastly different to the novels of Milan Kundera.

Jay Gatsby is a literary character steeped in mystery. Gatsby stalks twentieth century American literature. He resonates as he eludes us; his world shimmers as a great moment in a culminating history. He stands in 1922 on the brink of the future looking back at the innocence lost in World War 1 and forward to a materialism born out of self-invention. He is a primal, complex and symbolic reference point for the interpretation of the American Dream that became seminal in twentieth century American culture and literature and is still a defining motif of American identity today. Yet Gatsby's biography is unclear and unreliable. In the editing process, Fitzgerald cut most of Gatsby's dialogue and there are few significant descriptions of his physical appearance. We do not have direct access to his consciousness or his emotions; we are never alone with him and his dialogue is minimal. We see him only through the narrator, Nick Carraway, who is not a protagonist but merely a witness to the character of Gatsby and the world surrounding him.

On the surface of a comparison between Kundera's and Fitzgerald's literary technique for character construction, there would seem to be no common ground. Where Kundera makes his existential problems explicit, in Fitzgerald's writing there is no reference to the presence of existential problems, or any analysis or insight from the author or character that would illuminate Gatsby's motives or the nature of his experience. Though Fitzgerald was informed by much philosophical writing of the early twentieth century<sup>4</sup> which grappled with understanding and defining the values of the new materialist post World War 1 world, none of these are evident in *The Great Gatsby* in the way that Kundera uses Nietzsche's philosophy as the basis of the existential problem of Tomas in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

Fitzgerald's editor, Maxwell Perkins, sent Fitzgerald a letter of congratulations after receiving the manuscript of *The Great Gatsby*. In it he suggested that Gatsby's past be

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald Berman draws on key philosophers and commentators contemporary to Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* and *Fitzgerald's World of Ideas* to portray the prevailing ideas of the times. These philosophers wrote about the shift of values from traditional to new, from community to crowd and the influence of materialism and media on society. The main philosophers were William James, Walter Lippmann, H.L. Mencken and George Santayana.

made less vague, that the source of his money be made known...ø (Brucoli 2002, p. 208). However Fitzgerald did not significantly alter Gatsby in response to Perkins' advice. When he was waiting for the proofs, Fitzgerald wrote to Perkins, "Strange to say, my notion of Gatsby's vagueness was O.K..."ø(Fitzgerald 1990, p. xlv). It was Fitzgerald's intention to make Gatsby vague. Tanner writes, "that strange hint of ontological insubstantiality about him (Gatsby) is absolutely crucial"ø(Fitzgerald 1990, p.xlvi).

How then did Fitzgerald construct the fictional character, Jay Gatsby, who looms larger than many historical figures of the time and endures in our collective imagination? And is Gatsby's existential problem a fundamental reason for the enduring literary life of his character?

## **2. How Fitzgerald created the character, Jay Gatsby**

### **2.1 The inspiration**

As indicated in Chapter One, Fitzgerald took inspiration for his characters from real life. Soon after he spent the summer observing and participating in the social scene on Long Island in 1923, Fitzgerald began writing *The Great Gatsby*.

Zelda, Fitzgerald's wife, "said that Gatsby was based on "a neighbour named Von Guerlach or something who was said to be General Pershing's nephew and was in trouble over bootlegging"ø(Brucoli 2002, p. 178). There is evidence in Fitzgerald's scrapbook and in the factual, though scant, records of the day that aspects of Von Geurlach's life are similar to Gatsby's: he was referred to in a newspaper as "a "wealthy yachtsman". ("Yachtsman" was sometimes a euphemism for rum-runner)ø(Brucoli 2002, p. 178); he used the term, *old sport*, in a note to Fitzgerald, which Gatsby uses in the novel; and, like Gatsby, he had been an officer in World War 1.

However, while Von Guerlach was partly the basis for the construction of Gatsby, it is Fitzgerald's aim to "set down the story part of my generation in America and put myself in the middle as a sort of observer and conscious factor..."ø(Brucoli 2002, p. 80). that compels him to seek out the characters and details of the real world of the 1920s to inform his imagination.

Fitzgerald wrote to Charles C. Baldwin in 1924 describing his third novel manuscript (later titled *The Great Gatsby*) as “an attempt at form” (Brucoli 2002, p. 192). This statement resonates with the content of Fitzgerald’s letter to his daughter Scottie when he writes “the thing you have to say and the way of saying blend as one matter...indissolubly...” (Brucoli 1996, p.157) Form in the context that Fitzgerald uses it here can be interpreted as the structure of the book and the techniques deployed to convey the story and its meaning. Techniques include but are not limited to: the mode of narration; point of view; tone; language; voice and story.

It can therefore be argued that the starting point for the construction of *Gatsby* was Fitzgerald’s aim to be a witness to his generation through his observation of real life, and to embody his ideas in novels where form was a primary device for the communication of meaning.

## 2.2 The technique

Fitzgerald imbedded meaning in the style, symbols, action, descriptions and details of *The Great Gatsby* that collectively work to create the character of Gatsby and culminate in communicating the meaning of the novel.

Perkins wrote to Fitzgerald after he had read the manuscript of *The Great Gatsby*: “You adopted exactly the right method of telling it, that of employing a narrator who is more of a spectator than an actor: this puts the reader upon a point of observation on a higher level than that on which the characters stand and at a distance that gives perspective. In no other way could your irony have been so immensely effective, nor the reader have been enabled so strongly to feel at times the strangeness of human circumstance in a vast heedless universe” (Brucoli 2002, p. 208).

In this excerpt, Perkins obliquely refers to the two main literary devices that Fitzgerald used to construct *Gatsby*:

- Mode of narration ó the effect of the mode of narration including the lack of information in the portrayal of Gatsby which places significant weight on the use of symbolic details and descriptions.
- Importance of the world of the novel in situating and relaying the meaning of *Gatsby*’s character ó ie the suite of characters and their actions that derive from their world and portray the individual and collective consciousnesses of the 1920s.

## 2.3 The mode of narration

*The Great Gatsby* is written in the first person narrator's voice of Nick Carraway, who is an observer and only a minor actor in the story. However Fitzgerald achieves polyvalence by leaving gaps in the narrative, fragmenting information, embedding meaning in symbols and details, allowing distortions and shifts in Carraway's perspective – all of which engage the reader's imagination to navigate Gatsby's ambiguity from different perspectives.

The effect of this mode of relaying the story to the reader has some significant impacts on the construction of the character of Gatsby:

### 2.3.1 The ordinary observer

The main effect of the bystander-narrator first person who is unremarkable and observes the action of the novel is that the reader has a norm through which he can view and measure the extraordinary tableau of other lives. Carraway is an ordinary character and it is not his story that is being told, therefore receiving the story through him intensifies the differences and extraordinariness of Gatsby compared to Carraway. Bruccoli writes that Fitzgerald's mode of narration in *The Great Gatsby* made "Jay Gatsby convincing by letting the truth about him emerge gradually during the course of the novel" (2002, p. 221). The normality of Carraway's character as the narrator leavens what Bruccoli goes on to describe as the potential "preposterousness" (2002, p. 221) of the character of Gatsby because the reader accepts Carraway as a credible witness. Henry James wrote that "the indispensable history of somebody's normal relation to something" (Fitzgerald 1990, p.xix) is an important component of narrative mode, and further "By so much as the affair matters for some such individual, by so much do we get the best there is of it" (Fitzgerald 1990, p.xix).

However, as the story progresses, Carraway's perspective of the action of the novel and perception of Gatsby's character shift and become unstable. Gatsby's house is a mansion at the beginning of the novel but it is "that huge incoherent failure of a house" (Fitzgerald 2000, p. 171) at the end; Carraway views the scene of a party as "spectroscopic gaiety" but after drinking champagne it becomes "something significant, elemental, profound" (Fitzgerald 2000, p.45); at the beginning of the novel, Gatsby is *great* but at the end the

only character to attend his funeral (aside from Carraway and Gatsby's father) calls Gatsby, "The poor son-of-a-bitch" (Fitzgerald 2000, p.166).

Symbols slip their surface meanings and are found to mean something else. This duality is uncovered through the responses of Carraway to his unfolding experience of Gatsby and is essential to the creation of Gatsby as a character and the relaying of the meaning of the novel – there is duality in the way the novel is narrated and duality in Gatsby's character. However this duality is rooted in the deterioration of ideals and in the journey from surface representations to deeper realities, from lies to truth. In this journey it is lies/ illusion that are perfect and reality/truth that are degenerated. Therefore the ugliness of reality partly redeems or makes understandable Gatsby's fixation on constructing a life of illusion in order to reach closer to his ideal of recovering the perfection of love that has been lost. Once again this synthesis of the way of telling the story with the meaning of Gatsby's character and Fitzgerald's idea about 1920s America exemplify his aim to fuse form and content.

### **2.3.2 Control of information and use of details**

The lack and fragmentation of information about Gatsby is due to Carraway not knowing him well. Speculation about the truth of Gatsby (Carraway's, the other characters in the book and the reader's) builds to drive the narrative and give revelatory significance to the incremental discovery of information as the story progresses. A guest at one of Gatsby's parties comments: "Somebody told me they thought he had killed a man once" (Fitzgerald 2000, p. 45). Another suggests, "he was a German spy during the war" (p. 45). But the lack of information is not only due to Carraway's lack of knowledge of Gatsby, but to Gatsby's intention to conceal his true biography. This concealment is part of Gatsby's character, emblematic of the American society he occupies and therefore reflected in the way of telling the story.

By refracting the story through Carraway and third party accounts to Carraway, we have a more slivered, mysterious and partial view of everything. This technique magnifies the importance of every action and detail the reader receives. Therefore the reader must use all the information in the novel to apprehend Gatsby's character.

The details in the novel are key to the construction of character. Brucoli writes "Fitzgerald endows details with so much suggestiveness that they acquire the symbolic force to extend the meanings of the story" (2002, p.219). The collateral of the details and



striking images accumulate to illuminate Gatsby's character which is at first mysterious, superficial and almost preposterous but becomes complex and profound. There are many examples of details freighted with meaning, however the most important examples are those that deal with time. Details that are used at the beginning of the novel to connote time, for example the sundial in Tom Buchanan's garden and the green light on the end of his pier, seem like random and casual inclusions. However the meaning Fitzgerald attaches to time builds through Gatsby knocking over a defunct mantelpiece clock (Fitzgerald 2000, p. 84), catching it and putting it back in place during his first re-acquaintance with Daisy, to the end of the novel where the green light, the organic future (that) year by year recedes before us (Fitzgerald, 2000, p. 171) reveals the true significance of the green light on the end of Tom and Daisy's pier at East Egg – it was a symbol of hope but becomes a symbol of what is lost.

As Brucoli points out there are at least 450 words in *The Great Gatsby* that refer to time in symbolic or direct ways (2002, p. 220). These carefully placed details and symbols work to communicate Gatsby's essential struggle with time.

### **3. The importance of the world of the novel**

The world of *The Great Gatsby* consists of two intertwined elements: the suite of characters acting within the story and the ambient world of 1920s America. Both these elements combine to construct the character of Gatsby.

#### **3.1 The suite of characters: contexts and contrasts**

Carraway as narrator gives the reader a wide view of the suite of characters and of the experience of the society they inhabit. The exceptionalism of the character of Gatsby within his world and also in comparison to Carraway compels the reader to view the real world afresh. In many ways Carraway and Gatsby are binary oppositions and so their differences illuminate their characters. Carraway is from a traditional family from the West and lives in a modest rented house, Gatsby has made a fortune, lives in a mansion and is purportedly from a wealthy family from the mid-West (though we discover at the end of the novel that he is from a poor family from the West); Carraway has only tepid romantic ideals (his relationship with Jordan lacks desire), Gatsby is suffused with his ideal to

reclaim the love of Daisy with a blind and inexorable passion. Through positioning these two characters side by side, the perception of one sharpens the contrasts in the other.

Gatsby's friendship with the dubious character of Wolfsheimer, with whom Gatsby conducts some sort of financial transactions, offers another facet to his character. While we are never informed of the exact nature of Gatsby's dealings with Wolfsheimer or how Gatsby made his fortune (except for speculation that he was a bootlegger) the presence of Wolfsheimer in the story suggests that Gatsby's fortune was acquired immorally if not illegally.

Daisy, Gatsby's lost love, is from a rich family, dresses in white, at age eighteen owned a white roadster and was very popular. We learn that Gatsby has finished his early relationship with Daisy in his youth in order to make his fortune and subsequently has used his fortune to pursue her even though she has since married. In order to love Daisy, Gatsby idealises her and exhibits a "wonder in her presence" (Fitzgerald, 2000 p. 89) and describes her voice as being, "full of money" (p. 115). Daisy is the fusion of innocence, beauty and money and therefore personifies Gatsby's idealisation of these three qualities. In Daisy, money is symbolic of a future of promise and hope and through her characterisation we come to understand how Gatsby once innocently regarded money. However Gatsby uses his youth to accumulate a fortune through illegal means, conceals the truth of his dubious past through a fake biography and through all this moral degradation still retains the ideal of Daisy. The co-existence of these contradictory realities suggests hypocrisy at the heart of his character. Additionally his inability or refusal to compare the idealist behaviour with the immoral behaviour suggests a disconnection in his consciousness. The characterisation of Daisy is an essential device to explicate how the hypocrisy imbedded in the American Dream operates in Fitzgerald's depiction of Gatsby.

In this brief overview of some of Gatsby's interactions with other characters we can apprehend aspects of his character. In this way Fitzgerald uses each character to explicate the other and then particularises Gatsby within the suite of characters.

### **3.2 The ambient world of 1920s America**

While the characters in *The Great Gatsby* are engaged in an intimate and tightly woven story, they also live in and move around the world of 1920s New York. Brucoli describes Fitzgerald's technique as "scenic and symbolic" (2002, p. 219).

On the road that links West Egg with New York there is a valley of ashes ó a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens .... ash-grey men (who) move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air (Fitzgerald 2000, p. 26 ). This vividly described place is the location where the climax of the novel occurs when Daisy runs over and kills her husband's lover, Myrtle Wilson. The valley of ashes is first a scene described with vivid imagery, but it becomes symbolic of the moral decay of both the society which can tolerate the wealthy life of West Egg alongside the life of the valley and the characters (Daisy and Tom) who ruin the lives of the people who dwell in the valley. Fitzgerald, through the narrator Carraway, famously described Daisy and Tom as 'careless people, who, 'smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness ... and let other people clean up the mess they had made...' (Fitzgerald, 2000, p. 170).

The crowds of party-goers, variously described as *moths* (Fitzgerald 2000, p. 41) , as greeting each other with enthusiasm without knowing the other's name (p. 42), as groups who change swiftly, as a 'sea-change of faces and voices and colour under the constantly changing light...' (p. 42) are representative of how Fitzgerald perceived the society of 1920s America. As Berman suggests, Fitzgerald contrasts the restless crowd of the new world against the traditional community of the nineteenth century to express both the beauty of impermanence alongside the evanescence of life and values lost in the war and the consequent instability of a society undergoing change (Berman 1997, p. 71).

Descriptions of materialism, epitomised by Gatsby's mansion on West Egg, his endless beautiful shirts and library of books with uncut pages, contrast with the aspirations of Myrtle Wilson from the Valley of Ashes, who purchases *Town Tattle* and drug-store beauty products on a visit to New York. However both extremes of materialism are thematically linked in the idea that identity can be constructed through material possessions. What distinguishes Gatsby from Myrtle and the other characters is his reason for the construction of his identity through materialism ó Myrtle wants things because it is appropriate in the society in which she lives to want things, but Gatsby seeks wealth to buy back love, or at least a time of love when the future was innocent and unspoilt. Both of these depictions of the motivation for materialism and its association with identity are key to the portrayal of the complexity of the American Dream.

#### 4. Analytical commentary

Gatsby's existential problem is much more complex than the existential problem of Tomas in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, though there are similarities. Tomas does not know how to live in a world where life is only lived once. Gatsby also struggles against time but the means by which he struggles are inextricably of his world. Additionally Gatsby does not just want a world of eternal returns in order to add weight to life; he wants to live eternally in the one single moment of most promise, the moment of most future before the future was spoilt. Gatsby views the moment when he was first in love with Daisy as the time of highest ideals, that is, when the realisation of his ideals was most possible. He then turns away from the quest to realise his ideals to make a fortune and in so doing finds the only purpose for making his fortune is to buy back the moment he has forsaken. He cannot sustain his ideals in their original, innocent form because they have been spoilt, so he dreams. The co-existence of Gatsby's belief that he can buy back the lost moment of innocence with the reality that he has spoilt his innocence can only be tolerated in a state of unconsciousness or dream of the American Dream. The dream becomes a substitute for the ideal.

At the end of *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald, through Carraway, illuminates America's existential problem which synergises with Gatsby's:

“And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes as a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.”

Fitzgerald 2000 p. 171

Lippmann wrote in 1914, “The age of innocence haunts all of mankind and makes the present seem insubstantial,” and “Regaining paradise is part of the American social expectation and politically important for shaping the future” (Berman 1997, p. 160).

It can be concluded from this analysis of the literary devices used in the creation of Gatsby that his existential problem does partly fit with Kundera's definition:

- Gatsby has a core and specific problem
- the problem is enmeshed with Gatsby's particular world (1920s America)
- Fitzgerald uses situations, motifs, words and ideas to apprehend the enigma of Gatsby

It is not clear that Fitzgerald allocated an existential problem to Gatsby for the purpose of creating his character nor that he created Gatsby as an experimental self. Therefore while Gatsby embodies an individual existential problem that derives from and explicates the existential problem of his world, it cannot be concluded that Fitzgerald used this as a literary technique but rather this is the meaning that the novel communicates. The essential difference is that in Kundera's writing, he uses an existential problem as a technique for creation but in Fitzgerald's writing it is a theme. Fitzgerald's primary technique for character construction is the fusion of form with content.

## Chapter Three: The Creative Practice, *The Luna Museum*

### 1. Introduction

This chapter will investigate the techniques used in the construction of the main character, Nick Barlow, in *The Luna Museum*, using the broad headings identified in chapters one and two which frame the comparison between Kundera and Fitzgerald's respective literary techniques. A platform for new insights into how existential problems operate in character construction gained through this project will be established in this chapter and elaborated on in the Conclusion.

### 2. The inspiration and aims

As with Kundera and Fitzgerald, my inspiration and aims informed the writing of *The Luna Museum*. Through much analysis and review of the process and finished work I have distilled the following as the chronological development of my inspiration and aims:

- the zeitgeist - I wanted to write a novel to gain insight into my times - the late twentieth century informed by the mid-century. From this starting point I situated this creative inquiry in an urban Australian culture of affluence, but affluence contextualised by the characters' humbler origins and other characters outside of the affluent world. This reflected the historical trajectory of post war Australia in the spread of wealth and the development of a more culturally diverse society.
- early inspirations for characters and themes - I became interested in the vulnerability and fears of successful and wealthy people when a woman told me the story of her husband saying goodnight to his children. Her husband was a successful, ambitious and acclaimed lawyer with the outward appearance of unassailable confidence, yet when he said goodnight to his children his voice became soft and feeble, and according to his wife, fearful. I knew and had observed the woman's husband so this small insight she relayed ignited a powerful image and led to contemplation of the duality of success, of the disparate nature of the inner and outer person, of the possible stories that eddy beneath the outer calm and sustained achievement that was common in the affluent world of the late twentieth century. Further development of this thinking led to the idea that a version of contemporary affluence conceals inner anxiety. In this way

actions seem consistent until something goes wrong, but the inner life contains the fear that something will go wrong, change or be lost. Therefore the calibration of action in this scenario occurs in small degrees because lives are lived without the threat of impersonal disaster, eg. poverty, crime, violence. What is feared rather than acted out becomes a telling insight into a character's life.

- fear of the future ó combining the desire to understand the zeitgeist with the fear beneath success, I became interested in fear of the future as an ambient and insidious quality of life in the late twentieth century. This is amplified by the turn of the millennium. Fear of the future is common in human history and personal experience ó but what was interesting to investigate was the nature and source of this fear manifest in our times.

In summary the main inspiration for the creation of Nick Barlow in *The Luna Museum* was an actual person, though the final character is vastly different to that person. The creation is therefore based more in observation than thought, more Fitzgerald than Kundera. I share the aim to explicate a "new segment of experience" (Kundera 1999, p. 5) that is common to both Kundera and Fitzgerald.

Through the writing process, the narrative focus on Barlow's existential problems developed and was impacted by the construction of other characters and the world of the novel. I discovered each character's existential problem through imagining their individual and diverse backgrounds and using their past experiences to frame their actions and consciousness in the present-day of the novel. While each character's background differs significantly from the other, their action and interaction from their respective points of view facilitates multiple perspectives of Barlow and contributes to the construction of his character.

The suite of characters and their existential problems started to build a portrait that linked and evolved an underlying existential condition of the world of the novel. This development through the writing process reflects what occurs in *The Great Gatsby* which ultimately portrays the existential problem of the world that links all the characters. In *The Luna Museum* the existential problems cohered around each character's relationship to the future and how the past situated their individual and disparate futures. This translated into a burden to act combined with the fear of what might happen beyond their ability to act or control actions.

### 3. The development

Taking the tiny inspiration of the successful man saying goodnight to his children, I first started to create the character of Nick Barlow as a business man telling his own story in first person. This seemed appropriate to my aims and inspiration as wealthy business men are central to contemporary society's idea of success and narrating the story in first person gives the reader access to the consciousness in which the particular fear of the future could be explored. However this did not work creatively. I could not imagine the character with sufficient complexity or ambiguity to carry the investigation in a work of novel length. A wealthy business man afraid of the future did not raise enough questions in my mind and quickly became stereotypical.

At this point, after writing about 20,000 words, I would say in hindsight that I was seeking an existential problem within the umbrella idea of fear of the future. I did not think this at the time and this is an important point in view of the contrast between Kundera and Fitzgerald's treatment of an existential problem: Kundera seeks to get to the bottom of the existential problem in order to create the character; Fitzgerald's characters embody an existential problem as a theme, not as a literary device; Kundera's existential problem precedes his character while Fitzgerald's proceeds from the process of creating the character. I had a greater affinity with Fitzgerald's approach as I needed to write the character in order to discover the existential problem. In this context the existential problem of Nick Barlow was firstly an aim not a technique.

After much contemplation and writing I decided that Nick Barlow was an architect and this important breakthrough served the character construction in the following ways:

- an architect provided me with the imaginative potential for complex passions and ideas
- the topic of architecture resonated with the idea of the future because the act of designing architecture relies on a vision of the future
- the topic of architecture required research which anchored and substantiated the character in my creative imagination
- Barlow as an internationally acclaimed architect is, to a degree, a public person and this emphasises the differences between inner and outer by layering public persona over private life

Following this development it was important to situate Barlow at a turning point in his life reflective of the turning point of the century and hopefully to gain some insights into



the experience of life in our times. A turning point was also important because it had the potential to drive action, though, as stated previously, my aim was not to write a novel of significant outward drama because that did not accord with my perception of the zeitgeist. Additionally giving Barlow the late middle-aged age of 51 further signified this turning point and placed him in the baby-boomer generation which will move from the centre of power to the margins over the next ten years. His quest is to retain his centrality and currency as this equates to a semblance of immortality. The symbol of this quest is the commission to design the Luna Museum.

I was not, as Kundera states he is, strictly using Barlow as an experimental self, but as a kind of self with an inner life who could occupy a world both familiar and unfamiliar ó recognisable to me within my broader world but not of my experience; familiar enough to portray, but unfamiliar so as to facilitate genuine investigation and to inspire imagination.

#### **4. The mode of narration**

I abandoned the first person narration when I realised that another feature of life in the late twentieth century that I wanted to portray was how some people live atomised lives even within relationships. This added to the intensity of the difference between the inner life and outward appearances. In first person narration I would not be able to develop other characters that were essential to the story and the meaning of the novel and give them inner and outer lives with sufficient energy to communicate this theme.

The mode of narration became present tense third person point-of-view for each character in separate chapters. I chose present tense because it showed what was in the character's thoughts in the current contemporary moment and how the past and future operated in their consciousnesses. In this way there is no back-story or description other than what each character thinks about and what they think about contains their existential problems and the past turning points that have led them to the moment of the book. For example, Helen, Barlow's wife, thinks of her parents and so the reader learns about her family history. Barlow does not think about his parents and so his family background is not included in the novel. This reflects some aspects of Fitzgerald's craft in that I have attempted to reinforce the meaning of the novel through its narrative form.

Each character has undisclosed thoughts about the other, but each one does not really understand the other, and this is communicated through direct access to their consciousnesses. The reader can perceive what they think and feel while the other

characters only do this inadequately and from their own points of view. All the characters fear the future for different reasons and these reasons are imbedded in their pasts and typify specific twentieth century experiences.

Therefore the full story can only be perceived by the reader as there is no overarching narrative thread as in author/narrator (Kundera), first person bystander (Fitzgerald) or other forms, for instance, omniscient narrator. The effect of this choice of narrative mode I have attempted to achieve is both form and content ó to lay out a reality that is outwardly flat, where the action of the story is not so interesting without the layer of consciousness and there is no distinct authorial story-telling. This is congruent with aspects of life in the late twentieth century ó life is mostly even and personal amid the absence of overarching governing forces eg. religion, extended families, stable long-term communities, binding traditions.

## **5. The suite of characters: contexts and contrasts**

In order to contextualise the nature of Barlow's success and fear I had to make careful choices about other characters to achieve the contrasts and fields of action that would advance the investigation through Barlow. This did not happen through planning and analysis as it does here, but through writing with as much imagination and insight applied to understanding and showing Barlow as I could muster.

### **5.1 Success and fear of the future**

Through the development of flawed relationships and binary oppositions all characters explicate each other. Themes of the nature of contemporary success are embodied in each character and reflect back on Barlow. Helen, Barlow's wife, has constructed a complex ideal of success where the educated and professional woman with the perfect marriage has become her social expectation. Helen is paralysed by the gap between her ideal and her reality and cannot take up the future. Lili, Barlow's lover and a Bosnian refugee, is traumatised over her loss of future due to the war, and her idea of success is counted in meagre savings. In contrast to these two experiences of loss of expected success, Barlow is respected and acclaimed as successful but believes he has not attained the level of success he desires - a public and lasting achievement beyond his lifetime equivalent to the great architects of the twentieth century. For Barlow success must be public and visible, whereas

for Helen and Lili, success is measured on a personal scale. The differing scales of success work together to show the fraught exceptionalism of Barlow's ambition and its effect on others. At the same time we know from his consciousness that he deeply fears not attaining the success which he so desires and equates his creative limitations with his inability to connect with others. Barlow fears that he will either fail others or succumb to a life of lesser art.

## **5.2 Relationships between characters**

The four main characters, Barlow, Helen, Lili and to a lesser extent Lili's neighbour, Anne O'Leary, all live close to one another. Barlow experiences intimacy with Helen and Lili and this is parodied by Lili being his wife's masseuse. These characters share a close proximity but each remains disconnected and fearful of the other.

Since I imagined the characters atomised within their own points of view and disconnected from each other it was necessary to consider how love would operate within this world. Barlow is married but emotionally estranged from his wife. He seeks a love affair in conjunction with his quest to design and build the work of his life. The love affair with Lili, a Bosnian refugee of starkly contrasting experience and power, is random and a little desperate. Through his recollections of his early marriage and past infidelity with Eva Wegner, an admired colleague's wife, the reader comes to know that Barlow has an ambivalent and unformed capacity for love which troubles him. Love is Barlow's limitation. Though Barlow has a conflicted idea of love, he believes he needs the emotion of love in order to create art. Barlow needs love as an inspiration, as a catalyst to the disturbed passions and heightened sensation of being alive in order to conceive of an idea for the Luna Museum that will make it an iconic building. This has become the purpose of Barlow's desire for love; love is not an end in itself but a commodity of inspiration, of feeling sufficiently alive and powerful to achieve self-fulfilment. This aspect of Barlow's character is thematically central to the meaning of the novel and forms part of the insight into the zeitgeist within the world of the novel.

## **5.3 The world of the novel**

The world of the novel is constructed through the things that characters observe and their day to day experience. This contributes to characterisation through contrasting what each

observes and the pattern of their daily lives. However they are all linked by their contrasting reactions to the Luna Museum and it is the museum that represents a future common to all that pulls them forward in differing ways.

The novel is structured around the private action that occurs while the public museum is being designed and ultimately built. The museum is therefore a central metaphor and motif that repeats through the novel. Other details, words and concepts also repeat through the novel to explicate the character of Barlow.

## **6. Themes, details and motifs**

### **6.1 The museum**

The meaning of the museum develops according to how Barlow regards it. On page 50, it is, 'more an evocation than a structure, derived not from geometry but from a certain quality of longing.' In the office of the Minister for Public Works, Roger Lawrence, Barlow describes the design for the museum in concrete and philosophical terms: 'it is an elegant building that wraps into the hillside' (p. 55), yet at the end of this meeting Barlow is uncertain about his scheme for the museum and asks himself, 'Is it the peak of his career or a point on a declining arc?' (p. 56). By the end of the novel Barlow has abandoned his initial scheme completely. The shifting relationship Barlow has with his scheme for the museum parallels his shifting personal life and his inability to be certain of anything except that 'he hopes for ... a profound enlargement of spirit' (p. 60) through the affair with Lili.

Faced with the quest to create a building of iconic and enduring stature, Barlow is riddled with self doubt. His vision of the future is contained within the museum and ultimately the building is a testament to his lack of vision. He cannot see life beyond his own extinction. As a consequence, the final museum building is one in which the message of civilisation through art is analogous with archaeology, 'The Museum is a world where post-modern fragments have become remnants.' (p. 167)

Barlow's advocacy of the museum in the Epilogue works with the idea of inner and outer layers. The real world of the end of the twentieth century was concerned with the extinction of life on the planet, but Barlow's private fear is of the new generations that will displace him: 'The others still come ... the discs of new faces, unknown, as yet unexpressed, just the force of their bodies, the static of their sparking genes, their nascent

minds. The swell of them jolts him to the side (p. 164). For Barlow the future is alien and has no place for him.

The museum is also a turning point for other characters: for Helen it is the moment when she feels most alienated from her husband and all her anxieties culminate; for Lili, the museum, combined with the intimacy with Barlow, provides the catalyst to reconcile with the past and pursue her future.

## 6.2 Architectural references

Throughout *The Luna Museum* there are numerous architectural references which are designed to show how Barlow sees his world and those within it. Barlow thinks of his eyes as 'Reptilian eyes... sharp, efficient, looking askance at all things solid to deduce their purer form' (p. 53)

## 6.3 Youth

Barlow is painfully conscious of those who possess youth and this emphasises his anxiety, 'where is the life of thirty years that was once before me?' he asks in chapter one (p. 9). Barlow notices that Lili's face is 'young and lustrous' (p. 6); that, 'young men run towards him... on his morning run (p. 53); women laugh '...because they are young' (p. 85). This is an inconclusive list of the many references to youth and age. These build in Barlow's consciousness from the first chapter to the last.

## 6.4 The dichotomy between inner and outer worlds

Barlow often observes himself on the periphery or the interior of a situation. This reflects his fundamental dilemma of becoming marginalised as he ages and his fear of others. When he visits Lili in her apartment for the first time, he can '...hear febrile mutterings' from other apartments (p. 88) and '...the sounds of voices through walls, a door slamming, the hectoring proximity of competing lives' (p. 90). When Barlow is being seduced by Eva Wegner in a New York hotel he '...detects the sound of muffled footsteps in the corridor ... there is other life circling this small scene...' (p. 66)

## 7. Summary: Barlow's existential problem

While I did not allocate an existential problem to the character of Barlow and then construct him on that basis (as per Kundera's technique), nevertheless the concept of an existential problem has influenced the characterisation of Barlow. The aim to investigate what an existential problem might be for the character of Barlow directed the writing towards the discovery of his existential problem. Additionally I used the discovery of Barlow's existential problem to critically inform the editing process and imbed details, symbols and scenes in a structured way to communicate his existential problem.

Through the writing and editing of *The Luna Museum*, combined with research into the literary techniques of Kundera and Fitzgerald I have attempted to portray the following existential problem characterised by Barlow:

The weight of history at the end of the twentieth century overwhelms visions of the future. This is epitomised by the baby-boomer generation who now have more past years than future years and whose future sprung and grew through the trajectory of a more optimistic and innocent world than the one they occupied in 1999.

In the context of Barlow's quest to design an enduring iconic building, he must possess the creative power to imagine the future. He finds he cannot because of his personal limitation in truly connecting with another person, exemplified by his conflicted relationships with his wife and his lover. His fear of love is connected to his fear of the future: in his recollection of his honeymoon in London he reflects that he yearns for an ever expanding future. For her (Helen's) completeness he must remain incomplete. Two sentences later, ÷... he suspects that he only ever wanted to touch love lightly. (p. 51). This reluctance to be immersed in love becomes a conscious limitation following his violent sexual encounter with Eva Wegner, who manipulates and humiliates him. This moment is a turning point that truncates the future he had felt capable of when he was young. He interprets the experience as follows: ÷He believes she (Eva) raised a question of what kind of man are you, here on this bed, when all your connections fall away? (p. 83). Barlow wonders if ÷his subconscious atones to George (Eva's husband and Barlow's mentor) by rendering lesser art... (p. 84)

While Barlow's existential problem is anchored in mortality and time as is Kundera's character, Tomas, and Fitzgerald's character, Gatsby, all three characters regard mortality

and time differently. It is these differences that will be explored as the basis of the conclusions in the next chapter.

## Conclusion

### 1. Answer to the research question:

**How does Kundera's theory of using existential problems as a basis for character construction apply to Fitzgerald's creation of Jay Gatsby and how does it inform the creation of Nick Barlow in my novel, *The Luna Museum*?**

From an investigation into how Kundera's theory of character construction may apply to novels of different era, genre and culture using Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as a case study, it can be concluded that while Gatsby has an existential problem, it seems Fitzgerald did not use his existential problem as a technique but as a theme central to the meaning of the novel. Kundera explains that he is more moved by thought than observation (Bloom 2003, p.17) while Fitzgerald constructs his characters based on observation. This is an important distinction between the imaginative engines of Kundera and Fitzgerald that influence how existential problems operate in their novels: for Kundera the disembodied existential problem is a starting point for character construction because it is conceived in thought (or philosophical inquiry); for Fitzgerald characters are embodied through observation of real people and this is the catalyst for his imagination. Kundera has thoughts and then characters; Fitzgerald has characters and then thoughts.

It is clear from his own writing that Fitzgerald aimed to say something new by writing novels and this accords with Kundera's aim for the novel. However existential problems, though present, operate very differently for both writers. Fitzgerald employs many techniques of character construction to arrive at an explication of the existential problem of the world via the literary device of characters. In this way it can be argued that Fitzgerald elevates the meaning of the existential problem in literature – it is not a device but an essential meaning inextricably linking the world of the novel and the way the novel is written (the fusion of form and content as previously discussed throughout this exegesis).

Harold Bloom challenges the stature and longevity of Kundera's writing; *‘The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is formulaic, over-determined... Aside from its narrative verve, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* depends upon the relationship between the womanizing Tomas and the selfless, loving Tereza. Can Kundera render this fresh, or is it totally similar to many stories we all of us have read and known?’ (Bloom 2003 pp. 1-2)



Bloom concludes that he doubts Kundera's lasting eminence. Much talent has been invested here, in what proved to be Period Pieces (Bloom 2003, p2).

In contrast, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* has endured for over eighty years and continues to be widely acclaimed. Gatsby is an iconic literary character that is imbedded deeply in the collective consciousness of the western world. Much of the longevity of *The Great Gatsby* can be attributed to how it portrays the American Dream. Though the era of 1920s America is long past, there is something seminal about the character of America as a society captured in *The Great Gatsby* and embodied in Gatsby. Fitzgerald wrote with intense specificity about his and the novel's world and it is this specificity that is essential to the universality and endurance of his writing.

Kundera does not achieve the literary stature for his characters that Fitzgerald or any one of the celebrated and enduring novelists of history achieve. Arguably, part of the reason for this shortcoming in Kundera's work compared to Fitzgerald and others is connected to his use of existential problems to create characters and his interventionist and explicit mode of narration. The character Tomas is primarily formed in Kundera's imagination and delivered to the reader via clear analysis from Kundera. The mechanistic attachment of an existential problem to Tomas that is conceived in Kundera's intellect does not possess the power of a skilled writer seeking out the existential problems of a world through characters conceived by observing that world. In short, Kundera aims to make the character of his world, but his existential problems are born more of Kundera's own philosophical interest than they are of their world and as such often seem to be existing in a vacuum contrived as the backdrop to Kundera's inquiry.

## **2. Conclusion and new insight**

As a result of the research and reflection contained in this exegesis I propose that an existential problem is not an elemental device in the way it operates in literature and that it can be broken down into components. The inner workings of an existential problem impact how effectively it can be incorporated into a character (either as a technique for construction or as a meaning) to make the character alive and of its world.

Below is an analysis of the components of existential problems:

- **The impulse: the self** - this is an idea about human existence imbedded in the self and is often concerned with mortality and time. Though the impulse within an existential problem can be analysed there is often an element of ambiguity and inexplicability which derives from the enigma of existence.
  - Gatsby's impulse is to want to restore the possibilities of a moment in time forsaken in his youth.
  - Tomas's impulse is to try to ignore the weight of life only lived once.
  - Barlow's impulse is to remain at the centre of society with the peak of his life in the future even though he is aging and besieged by doubt.
- **The catalyst: the experience** - this is of the character's experience and is a moment of revelation and turning point. The catalyst is explicated in the story of the character, although it is often only on reflection over the full story of the novel that the catalyst can be understood.
  - Gatsby's catalyst is loving and losing Daisy at the moment when the future was most idealised and unspoilt.
  - Tomas's catalyst is when Tereza comes to him with love and vulnerability and he must consider how love invokes a heightened awareness of mortality.
  - Barlow's catalyst is the humiliating sexual encounter with Eva Wegner which made him feel less capable of the future he had envisaged when he was young.
- **The means: the world** - this is of the character's world and provides the scope for the character's field of action, though there will be obstacles to the successful deployment of the means. The means are what is available and typical of the character's world that can be used as an expression of self, to show self and to act in defence against the assailing forces of the particular world.
  - Gatsby makes a fortune through illicit means in order to buy back his ideal embodied in the love of Daisy. The means Gatsby uses (wealth) typify the world of 1920s America; however he fails because the means do not match the quest.
  - Tomas continues to engage in repetitive erotic encounters as a defence against the weight of love that reminds him that life is only lived once. However this is not particular to Tomas's world and does not specify Prague in the 1970s. Tomas fails

because the love of Tereza and his infidelity cannot co-exist and so he surrenders to the idea that life is only lived once.

- Barlow's means are his power within contemporary affluent society to realise his ambitions through freedom from attachment and a highly individual sense of his own right to self-fulfil. These are means available within the world of the late twentieth century and so are of his world. Barlow fails because he cannot imagine the future beyond his own centrality and so cannot resist the flow of the next generation that he knows will set him to the side.

While an existential problem may or may not be used for character construction it is an essential feature of the three diverse examples of creative practice used in this project: Kundera, Fitzgerald and my own. As such it cannot be concluded that the use of existential problems as a technique for character construction are used universally, though it can be suggested that existential problems are widely evident in literary fiction as either a technique or the basis of meaning.

The discovery of the components of a character's existential problem that results from the exegesis and creative writing elements of this project can be used in the creative and editing processes to assess the success of the character as a means of communicating the meaning of the respective novel. Further it can be used to critique characters to identify flaws and clarify meanings so as to imbue greater depth and meaning into the portrayal of literary characters.

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